

Welcome to Ivy World - a restaurant where food matters least

The kitchen at London's best-known restaurant is erratic. But that doesn't matter because what's most important is it's still the place to see or be seen, writes novelist **Joseph Connolly**

WHAT does The Ivy – arguably still London's best known restaurant – have in common with the English novel?

The more cynical among you might suggest that they are each of them populated by characters who do not really exist, stranded forever amid a setting of pure invention.

Too cruel – what I mean is this: while the impending demise of both is very regularly trumpeted, still The Ivy marches on triumphantly (as does the English novel).

The Ivy has never been about the finest cuisine. The extensive menu is that of a top-flight brasserie, the cachet dependent upon its legendary lustre and exclusivity. Among folk of a certain mindset, it is a badge of honour to be able to get a table whenever they want it.

This leads me to an oddity only visible in a highly successful restaurant. If you go in for lunch at 1pm, many tables will be heaving with people forking down the pudding or toying with an espresso.

And at 2.45pm, more people are just arriving – all, you see, were denied a table at lunchtime proper.

Same in the evenings – and don't tell me it's all down to pre and post-theatre suppers – because it ain't.

It's to do with the pitiable pliability of the importunate punter. He will telephone, listen to Vivaldi for an amazing amount of time and finally request a table for two at 8pm on a Friday, four months hence.

He will be told that Fridays at 8pm are out of the question until at least the closing ceremony of the London Olympics. But he could have the Tuesday of another week entirely at 6pm, with the proviso that said table is vacated by 8pm – whereupon said punter sobs out his gratitude, unable to believe his good fortune.

One way to tell the regulars from aspirants is from the set of their necks. Regulars look down,

aspirants around – they are aching for Jack Nicholson or Madonna or even a runner-up from Britain's Got Talent. This is how it is, in Ivy World.

I've always loved the room – low and sprawling, the comfortably solid art deco oak-panelled columns with mellow downlights set into their deep and overhanging cornice and, of course, the famous diamond-lead lights glinting shyly in topaz and emerald, ruby and golden amber.

The kitchen, however, can be erratic. You will never have a bad meal here – it can be more than good, sometimes magnificent, and often a mixture of both.

A month ago, I had a very so-so lunch – there was a shellfish bisque that tasted fishy and floury in equal measure, a veal, ham and mustard pie devoid of mustard, and that large chap from Gavin and Stacey taking up an entire banquet.

But when I went back last week for dinner, things were much improved.

My wife and I were sharing a mixed asparagus salad, largely because it came with something called "crispy Burford brown egg", and I was curious.

The salad turned out to be little asparagus tips sliced wafer thin with pea-shoots and leaves in a rather too sharp vinaigrette.

Then there was this orange breadcrumb misshapen thing at its centre. It might have been a Mars Bar escaped from a brawl in a Glasgow fish shop (battered in both senses) but was, in fact, a poached egg, plunged into the deep fryer. Pretty good: it did ooze convincingly.

As to mains, I was torn. My favourite dish here is the signature shepherd's pie – quite glorious, made from lamb and beef with a rich stock gravy. But I couldn't have that because I always have that and so it was between the corn-fed chicken breast with violet artichoke salmoriglio (Sicilian, this – basically a sauce of olive oil, garlic and lemon) and a Barnsley chop.

I went for the chicken and cursed myself when I saw the handsome chop delivered to the table behind, looking and smelling so utterly tempting.

I was praying that the man would eat it immediately because up until now he'd been laughing. Laughing as if limbering up for the final of The Laughing Contest, soon to go prime time and requiring telephone votes from you, the viewers.

On the other side, there was a huddle of Italian men in expensive suits speaking in a patois, the word fascist emerging with regularity.

Then there was a couple who, judging from their utter silence and mildly thoughtful faces, had been married for a very long time indeed.

And way over there, there was a leathery cove who looked just like the sainted Michael Winner (wasn't, though) with a 20-year-old blonde and a bottle of Dom Perignon: aah, young love.

The breast was large and enticingly golden (I'm talking about my chicken). Good enough, but it lacked that intense roast chicken flavour that you yearn for (and which you can get in the Club at The Ivy next door, where the chef is superb).

The violet thingummy thingummy turned out to be not so much artichoke as more of an arty joke – no luscious heart, just the stringy outer leavings, the sauce not lemony but just plain sour.



The Ivy, left, and Ham&High reviewer Joseph Connolly, inset.

FACTFILE

- **THE IVY**, 1-5 West Street, near Shaftesbury Avenue
- Telephone 020-7836 4751 (good luck!)
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- Opening times: Monday to Saturday, noon to 3pm, 5.30pm to midnight. Sunday, noon to 3.30pm, 5.30pm to 11pm
- Cost: About £120 for three courses with wine, coffee and service for two

My wife had pan-fried calves liver with bacon (pan-fried, please note – this dish was not fried in a trilby). I never eat offal, you see, and so, like sweet Loretta Martin, she gets it while she can.

She pronounced it one of the best ever. "Moussey," she said (not moosey or mousy, I'm pretty sure): "perfect liver, pink and fresh and glowing".

Mmm, I thought – chucking down another glass of Cotes du Rhone – not like mine, then.

The wine, a Perrin 07, was deep and nicely peppery – organic, though none the worse for that.

The sides were excellent and generous – creamy-flavoured and just so Jersey Royals, green beans and parmesan fried courgettes.

Laughing Man had either gone or been put down, the married couple were staring so glumly at their Baked Alaska as a waiter set fire to it (it might have been a funeral pyre), the Sopranos had ordered another bottle and the Winner ringer had apparently ordered another blonde, because there were two of them now (well look, so long as there's enough lurve to go round – not to say Dom Perignon).

Our own pudding was to be shared – Scandinavian iced berries with hot white chocolate sauce.

I put it to one of the tall and vigilant watchers, who ceaselessly roam with eagle eye and Richard James suit, 'Are these berries truly Scandinavian?'

He thought not: cold is the idea, you see. Righto. The chocolate sauce was not really hot enough to melt the berries (which is the raison d'être of this colourful confection) but

the flavours were good – redcurrants, blackcurrants, white raspberries and tiny wild strawberries (the star).

Then the sauce did begin to mingle, forming a pleasing marbled Art Nouveau swirl.

So off we go into the night.

But first, let me take you by the hand and lead you to the lavatories. The little girls' room is at the back of the restaurant, occasioning the ladies to sashay the length of the place.

The belles of the ball repeatedly walk the walk, while those less blessed seem as cast down as their eyes, and in a welter of mortification.

The Gents, however, is down the stairs from the entrance foyer. A warning to women: the

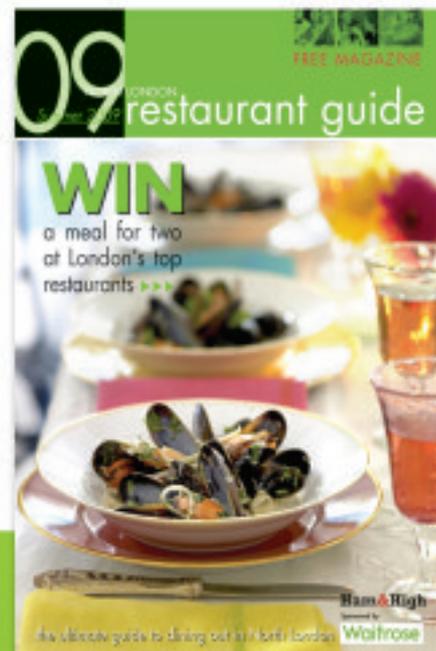
staircase does not lead to the door of the gents, oh no – it leads directly into the very gubbins of the thing. It's as well to know.

And in that foyer, another couple was leaving. They wanted a menu, a book match, a postcard – any little souvenir of this oh so frabjous outing.

The woman scanned my face, her eyes beseeching me to be at least a runner-up from Britain's Got Talent. She had decided months ago that here must be a night to remember. This is how it is, in Ivy-World.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad And Bloody Mary published by Faber and Faber at £8.99. For details, visit www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

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□ If any new installation is being carried out – be it a bathroom, shower or kitchen – make sure that the builder has left plenty of access to pipework for future repairs and maintenance. It will save lots of money later if an investigation for a leak takes place and all areas are easily accessible.

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